

# A History of Diane di Prima's Poets Press

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From 1965 to 1969, Diane di Prima's Poets Press published more than two dozen volumes by major poets of the 20th century—including Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and Frank O'Hara—and helped launch the careers of young writers such as Audre Lorde, David Henderson, and A.B. Spellman. Examining the press's output reveals an important intersection of the major underground literary movements of the mid-20th century, key countercultural concerns of the era, and a vibrant network of poets and artists. This essay draws on archival materials to construct a history of the press and the books it published.

By 1965, Diane di Prima had been writing and promoting her work and that of other underground writers and artists for several years. In 1961, she and LeRoi Jones began *The Floating Bear*, a mimeographed literary newsletter for young, experimental poets that, according to Jones, "was meant to be 'quick, fast and in a hurry'" and aimed to capture the "zigs and zags of the literary scene as well as some word of the general New York creative ambience" (Baraka 169). That same year, di Prima and a group of friends (James Waring, John Herbert McDowell, LeRoi Jones, Alan Marlowe, and Freddie Herko [*Recollections* 255]) founded the experimental theatre company New York Poets Theatre. She also had established herself as a poet, publishing in little magazines and producing collections such as *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* (1958) and *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961). As these activities suggest, di Prima had a network that extended beyond one particular literary scene, and her involvement with a wide variety of projects brought her into contact with an exceptionally diverse group of writers.

She also spent the late 1950s and early 1960s gaining publishing knowledge and skills that helped prepare her to run Poets Press (di Prima, *Recollections* 252). In addition to editing, typing, and printing *The Floating Bear*, two experiences stand out. In 1958, di Prima was approached by two individuals who planned to start a press and offered to publish a collection of her poetry as their first book. While she was in the process of preparing the manuscript for *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*, however, they changed their minds. Although they decided not to pursue publishing, they offered to do the press run if she did the other work involved (*Recollections* 182-184). Di Prima not only typeset the book, but also "learned such arts as dummieing a book for printing four-up, and stripping and opaquing negatives" and became captivated with the work (*Recollections* 182). Soon thereafter, Totem Press, run by LeRoi and Hettie Jones, published *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* as their first book. (It was also during this time that di Prima and LeRoi Jones were having an affair.) Another formative experience was assisting LeRoi and Hettie Jones with *Yugen* and Totem Press books during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In a 2014 interview, Hettie Jones recalled having stapling parties for the earliest issues of the magazine, stressing the importance of friends and community in the production process, a common practice that di Prima employed with her projects as well (Anderson 80-1). Di Prima sometimes visited the couple for dinner, and the routine of assisting with their projects afterward was instructive: “we would work together on *Yugen* magazine or one of the early Totem Press books...we would type and proof and paste till almost midnight. I learned some of the production skills I later used at Poets Press while working with Roi and Hettie” (*Recollections* 218).

It was within this context of productivity and experimentation that di Prima launched Poets Press. In her 2001 memoir *Recollections of My Life As a Woman*, she recalls her motivation: “owning a press and printing books seemed a natural next step after mimeographing *The Floating Bear* for so many years, and most recently turning out programs and flyers for the theatre on the Gestetner [copy machine]” (410). By the mid-20th century, it had become possible to print one’s own work relatively cheaply and easily, and the technological innovations of the period played a crucial role in making projects such as di Prima’s feasible: “direct access to mimeograph machines, letterpress, and inexpensive offset made these publishing ventures possible, putting the means of production in the hands of the poet. In a real sense, almost anyone could become a publisher” (Clay and Phillips 14). Di Prima purchased a Fairchild Davison offset press that came with one week of classes (*Recollections* 410). It was expensive—\$1,200—and she raised the funds by securing donations from artist friends after telling them of her vision for the press and the kinds of books she wanted to publish (*Recollections* 411). In March 1965, she rented a storefront on the Lower East Side across the street from the Poets Theatre to print Poets Press books (di Prima and Baraka xvii).

Di Prima’s New York City base also was an important factor in the press’s founding. As a native New Yorker, she had a deep knowledge of the city and an extensive social network. Moreover, rents were cheap and equipment and supplies readily available and often inexpensive (Clay and Phillips 14). While di Prima and her contemporaries’ projects were a world apart from the major publishing houses, they benefited from their physical proximity. In a November 22, 1967, letter to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, di Prima’s then-husband Alan Marlowe said of New York, “this is the world printing center, all practically within walking distance: paper, printers, binders, stats, Xerox, etc” (City Lights Records, Box 8, Folder 20).<sup>1</sup> She herself noted that “New York in those days was full of stores that sold broken cartons and odd lots of paper,” enabling her to find the paper used for the first Poets Press book in a remnant shop (*Recollections* 412).

The press was di Prima’s vision, but she did not work alone. During the first few years of *The Floating Bear* she regularly recruited help to produce the issues, a strategy she also employed while running Poets Press (di Prima and Baraka xii).

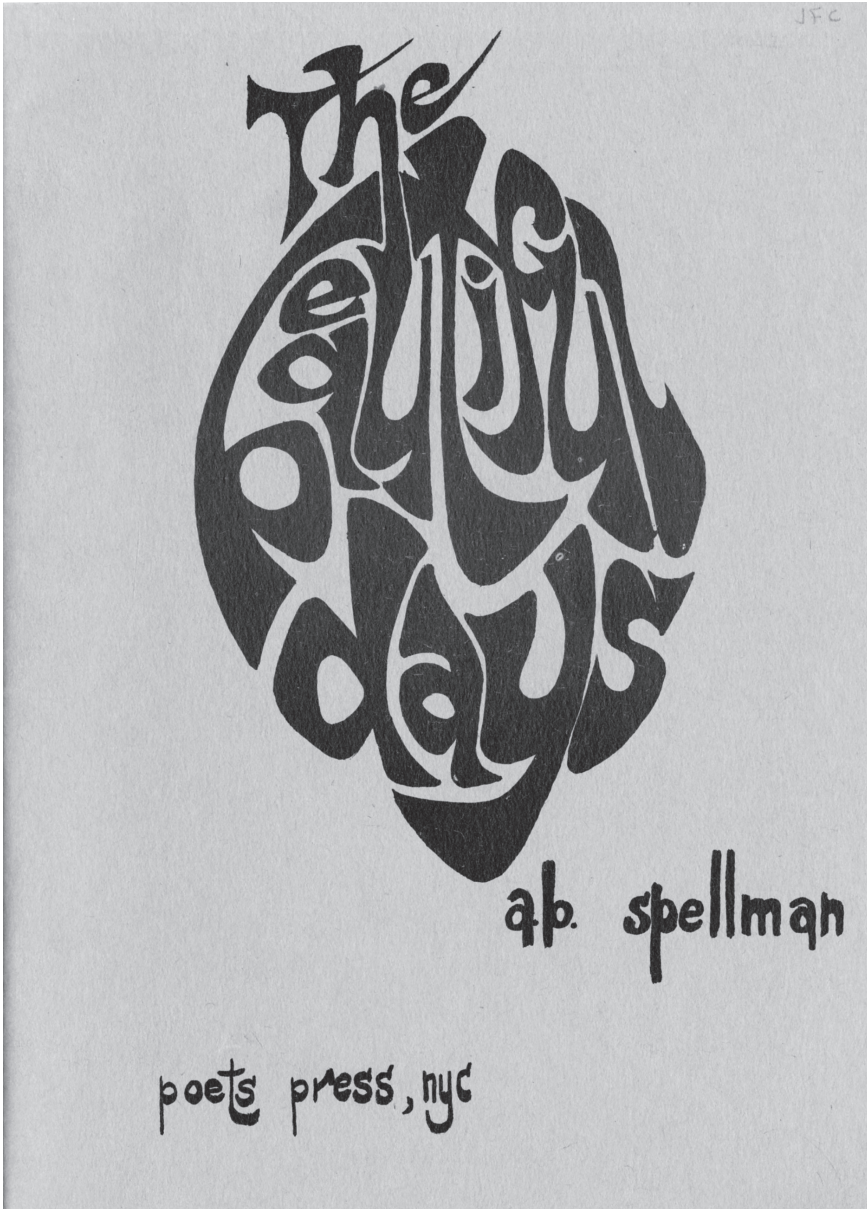
Friends assisted with whatever needed to be done: proofreading, printing, collating, stapling, and mailing (*Recollections* 418). In a letter to artist George Herms, di Prima mentioned a friend who “used to spend 36 hours at a streth [sic] addressing envelopes & now sends out Poets Press books, and proofreads whatever I typeset” (George Herms Papers, Box 5, Folder 9, no date). Collaboration of this nature was typical for small presses and little magazines of the era. As scholar Linda Russo has observed, during the mimeo revolution, “where friends assembled[,] materials were assembled” (249).

In addition to di Prima's friends, Marlowe played an integral part. In a letter dated June 24, 1965, he wrote to inform Lawrence Ferlinghetti of the new press, describing his own role as a partner in the project:

Diane and I have a shop set up and a photo offset press. We will be printing and publishing books at the rate of one a month...Diane sets the proofs up on the IBM, I do paste up, and run the press. I will also try and see that there is proper distribution of the books around the country. This is a family operation. (City Lights Records, Box 8, Folder 20)

Di Prima wanted Marlowe to be an active participant in her world and also encouraged him to write and edit. In a March 29, 1968, letter to him she said, “your letters are fantastically beautiful—I want to make them into a book—yr letter and my journal for the NY scene side by side day by day—Please keep up your journal—you are in unique position at a unique moment in history” (Diane di Prima Papers 1934-1992, Box 4, Folder 10). That same year, Marlowe selected poems for di Prima's *Earthsong: Poems 1957-1959*, and in 1969, Poets Press released a collection of his poetry called *John's Book*, dedicated to John Wieners and John Braden (a friend of di Prima and Marlowe's, and Marlowe's sometime lover). Yet di Prima's collaboration with Marlowe—an actor, director, and fellow cofounder of the New York Poets Theatre with no previous writing or publishing experience—was different from her work with Jones on *The Floating Bear* and from other male/female collaborations of the period, as she had far more expertise than her partner and was decidedly the initiator and architect of the project.<sup>2</sup>

In mid-1965, the press published its first book, *The Beautiful Days* by A.B. Spellman, poet, music critic, and founding member of the Black Arts Movement (see fig. 1). Spellman's work had appeared in *The Floating Bear* and prior to Jones and di Prima beginning the newsletter, Spellman and di Prima had planned to start a literary journal together (Meltzer 13). The collection, which was Spellman's first, included an introduction by Frank O'Hara and illustrations by African American artist William White. The press produced a first run of 750 copies of the softcover edition that sold for \$1.00 and 10 copies of a hardbound limited edition for \$15



*Fig. 1. Front cover of The Beautiful Days by A.B. Spellman, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University.*

(*Recollections* 412; City Lights Records, Box 8, Folder 20, 4 November 1965). Reviews were enthusiastic. In *The East Village Other*, poet Carol Bergé declared Spellman “a modern man who speaks with today’s language” with a “voice sharp and clean,” and in *Paper*, poet and activist John Sinclair called the volume “a rare delight” (12-13). A review in *Work* urged readers to “please get this book” (Moore 104).

An examination of the Poets Press catalog reveals a fascinating intersection of the major underground literary movements of the mid-20th century: writers spanned the Beat Generation, the Black Arts movement, the New York School, Black Mountain, and San Francisco Renaissance. The books also reflect major countercultural concerns of the era, including the sexual revolution, drug use, and the anti-war movement. Examples of publications include a pirated translation of a Jean Genet poem, a Timothy Leary adaptation of Book One of the Tao Te Ching, and an anthology of poetry protesting the Vietnam War. In its holograph series, it published limited editions of some of the most important poets of the second half of the 20th century, including Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and John Ashbery. Perhaps more important was the press’s dedication to championing new writers and publishing first collections. Eight of nearly 30 books in the press’s catalog were by new poets, the Press helping to launch the careers of poets such as Audre Lorde, Clive Matson, Kirby Doyle, A.B. Spellman, and David Henderson. Several of the individuals the press published were young poets whose work had appeared in *The Floating Bear* and other little magazines, but who had not yet released a collection, a position that di Prima could likely sympathize with, having faced challenges getting her own work in print (Grace and Johnson 97).

How many books did Poets Press publish? This seemingly simple question is surprisingly difficult to answer. One reason is because of what remains; there is no Poets Press collection held at any public or academic archive, as there are for publications such as *The Floating Bear* and *Yugen*. Furthermore, di Prima’s archives are dispersed across the country at several institutions, none of which has a clearly defined series of Poets Press materials within their collections.<sup>3</sup> Poets Press is often mentioned in writing about di Prima, but examining this information reveals discrepancies. For example, Russo noted that the press published 12 books between 1965 and 1968 (252), and Amy Friedman counted a total of 29 books during its run (29). Sharon Slate Gibson’s unpublished biography available in the University of Louisville special collections includes notes addressed to di Prima asking if the press published 23, 28, or 29 books. The total number of books Poets Press published, however, appears to be 27. There are also inconsistencies about when the press started, likely because di Prima’s own date for its founding oscillated between 1964 and 1965. For example, the “Diane di Prima Chronology” in *Pieces of a Song* lists 1964 as the year she began Poets Press, founding it with Alan Marlowe (198),



whereas in the introduction to the 1971 collection of *The Floating Bear*, di Prima recalled setting up her print shop in 1965 (di Prima and Baraka xvii). Furthermore, there is limited information available about what books were published by the press, some of which is inaccurate. *Freddie Poems* was first published in 1974 by di Prima's later press, Eidolon Editions, but is commonly cited as a Poets Press book, sometimes as *Poems for Freddie*. *New Mexico Poem*, a fine press volume designed and printed by Igal Roodenko and published in 1968, is often attributed to Poets Press but includes no bibliographic information linking it to the press and, perhaps more tellingly, bears no resemblance to either the softcover or limited edition Poets Press books. Additionally, the bibliographic information in the Poets Press books changes throughout the course of the press: some volumes provide the press name, location, print run; others do not. To some extent, these discrepancies are not surprising from a small press, and the variations speak to both improvisation and a lack of interest in standardization. Collectively, however, these issues likely have contributed to the lack of attention the press has received in the intervening years.

Poets Press produced some significant publications during its existence and highlighting a few examples is essential to appreciating di Prima's project. *Huncke's Journal* by Herbert Huncke contained stories and recollections written between 1948-1964 along with illustrations by Erin Matson. A Times Square hustler, Huncke and his "lifestyle undoubtedly provided the very model of what it meant to be Beat and to struggle against a system that stymied any alternative phenomenon that deviated from the mainstream" (Niski). An associate of William S. Burroughs and a mentor to Allen Ginsberg, he appears in a fictionalized form in *Junkie*, *Howl*, and *On the Road*, and it was his use of the word "beat" that was adopted and circulated by Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg (Charters xvii-xviii). In his autobiography, *Guilty of Everything*, Huncke remembered his first book's genesis: "I ran into Diane di Prima on the street...[she] asked me if I had anything she could publish....I finally grabbed a whole lot of stuff at random I'd had in various places and gave them to her....She published one or two things in her *Floating Bear* journal, and then she put together my first book" (180).

*Huncke's Journal* was Poets Press's second release and its only volume of prose, likely because of the labor-intensive process of preparing it for publication. In *Recollections*, di Prima described the slow, painstaking method of creating the book's justified right-hand margin:

The way to do that with an "executive" typewriter was to count the hairline spaces that were needed to even out the margin of a particular line, ... writing the numbers onto your typewritten copy. Then you retyped the whole page, adding the tiny spaces with the space bar as you went along. Each line was different, of course—it was a nerve-wracking process. (412)

Until the 1965 publication of *Journal* at age 50, Huncke had remained unpublished. His presence on the scene, influence on Beat writers, and honesty and skill in writing about taboo topics and documenting life on the margins all make *Huncke's Journal* a noteworthy publication. Scholar Rob Johnson called it "one of the more important memoirs by a male writer from the Beat Generation," stating that the "first edition of 1,000 copies sold quickly" (145). In a letter to Huncke, Ginsberg expressed his admiration of the work, noting, "Your own book is the most interesting new truthful word-text I've read in recent years-era" (Morgan 314).

Another important Poets Press book is Audre Lorde's *The First Cities*, the debut collection of the feminist writer and civil rights activist, who had attended Hunter High School with di Prima. According to Lorde, the 1968 volume was the result of di Prima's encouragement:

she said, "You know, it's time you had a book." And I said, "Well, who's going to print it?" I was going to put these poems away, because I had found I was revising too much instead of writing new poems...Diane said, "You have to print these"...and the Poets Press published *The First Cities*. (Lorde and Rich 720)

In her introduction for the book, di Prima portrayed Lorde not only as an old friend, but also, like herself, a lifelong poet: "I have known Audre Lorde since we were 15, when we read our poems to each other in Home Room" (Welch). The publication was a major turning point in Lorde's career. The book garnered invitations for readings and positive reviews, notably including one by poet and publisher Dudley Randall, whose influential Broadside Press later released two of Lorde's collections (De Veaux 99).<sup>4</sup> In his review, Randall declared *The First Cities* "a quiet, introspective book" with poems that "attract you by their fresh phrasing, which draws you to return to them and discover new evocations" (13-14). Randall also observed that Lorde "does not wave a black flag, but her blackness is there, implicit" (13). It would not be until later collections that Lorde would hone the radical voice of dissent for which she is known today, using her poetry to explore lesbianism, feminism, racism, and social injustice. Lorde had worked as a librarian until 1968, when she accepted the position of poet-in-residence at Tougaloo College in Mississippi (Lorde and Rich 720). The publication of *The First Cities*, combined with the residency, launched her career as a poet. After Tougaloo, she was offered a teaching position in the City College of New York's SEEK Program subsequent to the director of the writing program being given a copy of *The First Cities* (De Veaux 101-02).<sup>5</sup> It was only a few years later, in 1974, that a writer in *Margins* declared Lorde's first book "now a collector's item" (Welburn 41).

There is a casualness to both of these stories that should not obscure di Prima's perceptiveness, willingness to take risks, and commitment to emerging writers. Di Prima herself put it most succinctly in a letter to Marlowe, in which she reflected on her strengths and the press's future: "I am a good hustler" (Diane di Prima Papers, 1934-1992, Box 4, Folder 10, March 29, 1968). With both Huncke and Lorde, her advocacy and resolve were integral to bringing works to light that otherwise may not have been published.

Lastly, *War Poems*, edited by di Prima and published in 1968, is an important document of 1960s counterculture poetry and political engagement. One of the earliest anthologies to protest the Vietnam War, the collection comprised works by 11 poets, making it considerably longer than most of the other books the press produced. *War Poems* was a substantial undertaking, and di Prima was proud of the book and what it meant for the future of the press. In a March 29, 1968, letter she told Marlowe, "I have started setting it—80 pages or so—I'll take an ad in all the peace journals and the *Voice* and perhaps some college papers. . . I feel the press is about to get off the ground and take off" (Diane di Prima Papers, 1934-1992, Box 4, Folder 10). She published the book in the midst of successful mainstream anthologies such as Walter Lowenfels's *Where Is Vietnam? American Poets Respond* (1967). With 87 contributors, Lowenfels's anthology had a broad scope, featuring Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti alongside Robert Lowell and James Dickey. Though *Where Is Vietnam?* positioned itself against the Vietnam War, Lowenfels made clear in his introduction that the collection was not antiwar: "few of our contributors are pacifists; many are veterans, including one who has served in Vietnam. It is this particular war that has aroused them" (x). By comparison, *War Poems* was firmly entrenched in the culture and politics of the underground, and featured some of its most significant poets, including Gary Snyder, Joel Oppenheimer, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Philip Whalen, Robert Duncan, and LeRoi Jones. The collection was not simply protesting U.S. involvement in Vietnam but was a condemnation of America and its history and perpetuation of violence, oppression, and racism. The anthology features some particularly important protest poems, including Michael McClure's "Poisoned Wheat," which denounces the U.S. wartime tactic of poisoning wheat fields in Cambodia, and the famous anti-war lament "Wichita Vortex Sutra" by Allen Ginsberg, who worked with di Prima to select poems for the anthology. *War Poems* also contains one of di Prima's best-known poems, "Rant, from a Cool Place," which provides numerous examples of the U.S. government's corruption and in the process reveals the poet's skepticism and outrage about the state of the country.

In addition to publishing both new and established writers, Poets Press also was a venue for di Prima to promote her own writing. In an interview for his 2001 book *San Francisco Beat*, David Meltzer asked di Prima what a poet could do to reach an audience. Her answer was remarkably consistent with her attitude 50 years before:



"it's important to self-publish and make your work available" (Meltzer 21). Since she had been warned years before that "nobody in the world would publish [*This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* ]," the importance of having unmediated access to a press and the ability to print her own work liberated di Prima (Moffeit 97). During the press's existence, she published three volumes of her own poetry: *Earthsong: Poems, 1957-1959* (1968), *Hotel Albert* (1968), *L.A. Odyssey* (1969); a volume of translations, *Seven Love Poems from the Middle Latin* (1965); a reprint of *The New Handbook of Heaven* (first published by Auerhahn Press in 1963); and included her work in *War Poems* (1968).<sup>6</sup>

Di Prima had been drawn to publishing for its democratizing and radical potential, as indicated in part by her tendency to refer to herself as a printer rather than publisher. In a journal entry dated May 30, 1965—the outset of Poets Press—she declared, "I shall type and write and print—Printing books shall eventually be my trade" (Diane di Prima Papers, 1934-1992, Box 7, Folder 5). Reflecting on how she came to establish the press, di Prima later said, "the anarchist dream of being a printer had long been with me" (*Recollections* 410). She often cited her grandfather, the anarchist Domenico Mallozzi to whom *Revolutionary Letters* was dedicated, as a major influence. In a 2010 interview, she observed, "[d]oing a press is a very big pleasure, not only for the people [whose work] you're getting out, but it also creates a community—and that in itself is very important" (Jackson). Like other small press publishers of the era, she recognized publishing as a way to engage with and support a group of like-minded writers and artists.

This perspective inevitably informed Poets Press's aesthetic. Typically, the books were less than 40 pages and lacked page numbers and a table of contents, aspects that made them easier and cheaper to produce.<sup>7</sup> Nearly all had saddle-stitched binding, some done with the very stapler di Prima had used to assemble her own earliest books (*Recollections* 412). The printer's device—a woodcut of a basilisk from Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* (1597), a nod to di Prima's interests in alchemy and the classics—appeared on the back of many of the softcover editions.

As might be expected of a new small press, some of the books had imperfections in design or execution. For example, the font in Frank O'Hara's *Odes* is uncomfortably small and the juxtaposition of images and text in Margaret Danner's *Iron Lace* is awkward. Yet the books were not devoid of artistry, and several include artwork, some by important artists of the era. Abstract expressionist Michael Goldberg created the cover for Frank O'Hara's *Odes*, visionary arts co-founder and *San Francisco Oracle* art director Michael Bowen designed Timothy Leary's *Psychedelic Prayers*, and California collagist and close friend of di Prima George Herms provided cover art for her works *Earthsong: Poems 1957-1959* and *L.A. Odyssey*. Several editions by new writers included introductions by established poets, a significant coup for any young poet that was possible because of di Prima's extensive network. Ginsberg

introduced Herbert Huncke, LeRoi Jones introduced David Henderson, John Wieners introduced Clive Matson, and Robert Creeley introduced Alan Marlowe.<sup>8</sup> A 1966 ad for the press in issue 32 of *The Floating Bear* noted that it planned to release a new title every month (di Prima and Baraka 414a). This was an ambitious goal for a fledgling publisher, and the closest di Prima would come to realizing this aim would be to publish 10 titles in 1968.

Di Prima began the press with the intention to publish books in two editions. An undated press release noted that one would be “a low-priced paperback edition of two thousand copies, the other, a limited hardbound signed edition of twenty-five copies, specially designed for college libraries and collectors” (Ted Wilentz Collection, Box 1, Folder 2). Print runs for the books ranged widely, with the smallest (non-limited editions) consisting of 150 first edition copies and the largest 2,500. By 1968, this plan had given way to publishing inexpensive, softcover editions of books by new writers and holograph limited editions of well-known writers, as the latter were more economically viable than the softcovers and easier to produce than the hardcover limited editions. In a February 7, 1968, letter aimed at persuading Ferlinghetti to become a dealer of these limited editions, Marlowe explained: “We make 150 copies, signed by the author.... We are issuing one a month. Last month Corso. Next month Creeley. Hope to get a piece of the personality of the Poet into each book. The limiteds are supporting us and the press” (City Lights Records, Box 8, Folder 20).<sup>9</sup> Between 1967 and 1969, Poets Press published seven of these holograph limited editions: Allen Ginsberg’s *Scrap Leaves: Hasty scribbles* (see figs. 2 and 3), Michael McClure’s *Little Odes Jan-March 1961*, di Prima’s *L.A. Odyssey* and *Hotel Albert*, John Ashbery’s *Three Madrigals*, Robert Creeley’s *5 Numbers*, and Robert Duncan’s *Play Time Pseudo Stein*. Multiple volumes in the series featured earlier works by major poets. For example, Ashbery’s *Three Madrigals* was comprised of work he had written in 1958, and the cover of Robert Duncan’s book notes that the writing within is from “the laboratory records notebook of 1953.” More pointedly, the subtitles of Ginsberg and Corso’s volumes read like disclaimers. Ginsberg’s book states on the cover that the poems included within are “hasty scribbles from Journals hither too puzzling for me to publish,” and Corso’s notes that the works were “collected at random from 2 suitcases filled with poems—the gathering of 5 years.” These softbound volumes, typically 12 pages long, were facsimiles in the poets’ hand. One advantage for di Prima was that this format meant there was no need to worry about typesetting or access to equipment, a concern because she made several moves during the years she maintained the press. For readers, the holograph editions provided an intimate and informal perspective, and Ginsberg’s, di Prima’s, and Duncan’s volumes included not only text, but also artwork or doodles by the writers.

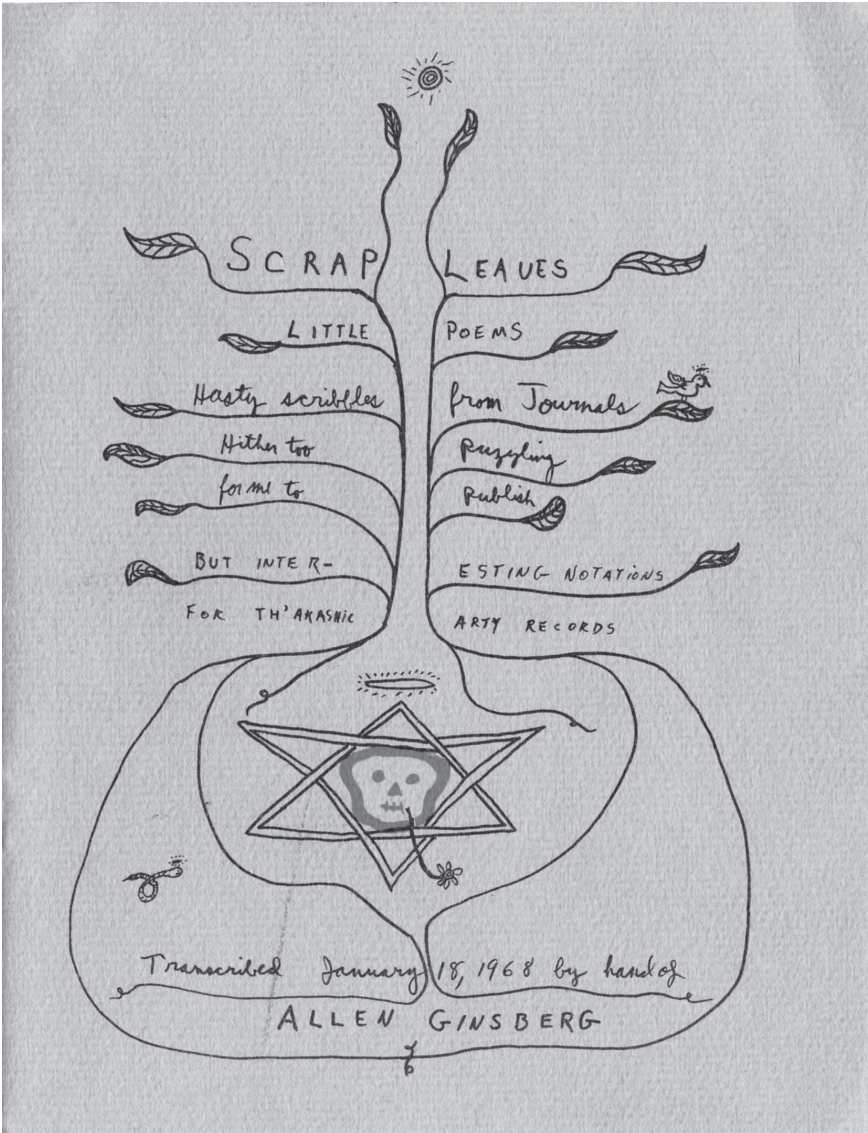
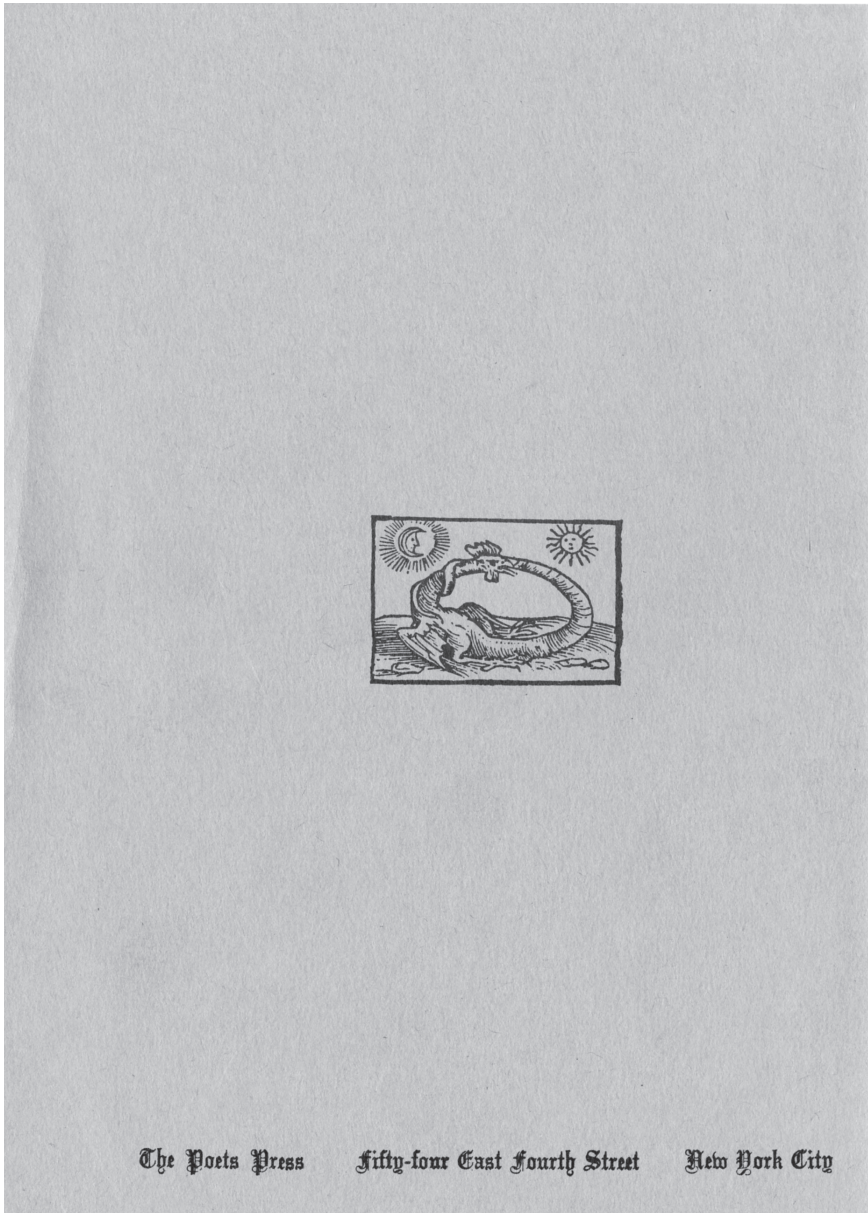


Fig. 2. Front cover of *Scrap Leaves* by Allen Ginsberg, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University.



*Fig. 3. Back cover of Scrap Leaves by Allen Ginsberg, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, The Ohio State University.*



According to di Prima, Poets Press books did not have trouble finding an audience. In *Recollections*, she remembered:

I had begun to build up a list of libraries and bookstores which had standing orders for everything I printed....At the height of the Press...I was mailing out six hundred copies as soon as a book was ready, and I had to up the first printing of each book from one to two thousand copies, to have enough for the stores. (417)

Notices about the books appeared in little magazines and underground newspapers such as *LA Free Press*, *Olê*, *Margins*, *Quixote*, *The Berkeley Barb*, and *The Paper*, often receiving positive reviews. The press also was recognized by the then-newly established National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities (later the National Endowment for the Arts), which awarded di Prima three grants during its five-year run. In an August 2, 1967, letter to di Prima, the foundation recognized Poets Press for championing “authors of significant works who have difficulty in being published through the usual commercial channels,” acknowledging its efforts “in advancing the cause of the unknown, obscure or difficult writer, and in the publication of books visually and typographically distinctive, thereby helping to advance the cause of the best in American art” (Ted Wilentz Collection, Box 1, Folder 2).

Readers acquired Poets Press books in a variety of ways. One method was to purchase directly from di Prima. In 1966, a full-page advertisement in *The Floating Bear* 32 included a list of current and forthcoming titles with an order form. The books also were available from several of the important bookstores of the era, some of which also acted as regional distributors for the press. In a letter negotiating the terms of such an arrangement, Marlowe told Ferlinghetti, “We would be pleased to have you act as a distributor in your area. 50% OK” (City Lights Records, Box 8, Folder 20, 23 September 1965). Other bookstores that carried Poets Press included the Phoenix Book Shop (where di Prima had worked), Eighth Street Bookshop in New York City, the Tenth Muse Bookshop in San Francisco, the Student Book Shop next to the University of Buffalo, and Indica Bookshop in London. As these shops “provided a meeting place for the literary community as well as an outlet for selling new writing,” they played a crucial role in supporting and publicizing small presses such as di Prima’s and writers such as the ones she published (Birmingham, “Floating Bear”).

Despite the successes, Poets Press also experienced publishing setbacks and financial problems. Evidence of these troubles is apparent in the discrepancies between the press’s catalog and ads. For example, an advertisement in issue 32 of *The Floating Bear* noted several forthcoming volumes, including a collection of

short stories called *A Quiet Sunday at Home* by Joel Oppenheimer, *The Calculus of Variation* by di Prima, *Braincandy* by Philip Whalen, and poetry collections by Harold Carrington and Arnold Weinstein, none of which Poets Press released. Issue 35 still listed the di Prima, Weinstein, and Whalen titles as upcoming releases, adding Robin Blaser's *The Faerie Queene*, which also was not published by the press. Of all of these titles, Whalen's *Braincandy* is perhaps the most notorious. Di Prima later said of this work, "It was a thick book and took a dreadfully long time to set. It had to go to Japan and back to be proof-read by Phil Whalen, and by the time it came back, Phil had signed a contract with Harcourt, Brace and World to do *On Bear's Head*, a great big book...a large chunk of which is *Braincandy*" (di Prima and Baraka 571). In an interview years later, di Prima recalled, "it was just about ready to go to press when Philip found a publisher who could give him money and he needed money" (Hadbawnik). Although di Prima did not explicitly say so, it is evident that Whalen's decision to profit from signing with a major publisher was a financial loss for her.<sup>10</sup>

Another example is Robert Duncan's *Play Time Pseudo Stein*, which was intended to be part of the limited edition holograph series. Only 35 copies were printed for subscribers and an unspecified number of lettered "author's copies" were produced. Printing of the work was cut short due to a disagreement between di Prima and Duncan about the number of author copies he would receive. He had expected "twenty-six lettered copies, decorated by him, as the 'author's edition,' which—because of her prior arrangement with Robert Wilson of the Phoenix Book Shop—di Prima could not give him (the production of the holograph series was to be financed through the sale of the manuscript to Wilson and the strict limitation of the edition)" (Quartermain 790). Duncan subsequently published a second edition with bookseller Julia Newman's Tenth Muse. In it, he included "A Little History of This Edition," explaining the story behind the aborted first edition. Duncan's anger at di Prima, whom he saw as exploiting her connections for financial gain, is apparent: "At the beginning of this year, 1969, Diane di Prima and Alan Marlowe asked me for a book for their Poet's Press series. 'We need bread Creeley and Alan [sic] gave us books and we want you to give us one'...Time had come and my payment due for the existence of that remarkable Lady Pirate."<sup>11</sup>

As Duncan's preface and the loss of *Braincandy* suggest, money was a perpetual problem in di Prima's personal and professional life, her letters and journal entries from this period foregrounding lack of money as one of the most consistent themes. In an undated (but likely 1967) letter to Herms, she said, "we are lootless," and a notebook entry dated "December 10, Saturday" (possibly 1969) recorded that she was "looking for things to sell, because no money at all in sight" (George Herms Papers, Box 5, Folder 9; Diane di Prima Papers, 1955-2008, Folder 566). Most notably, di Prima wrote *Memoirs of a Beatnik* during this period because of



an urgent need for money (192). One factor was that as an underground poet who worked odd jobs, di Prima had a limited and unpredictable income. Another issue was Marlowe's behavior. In *Recollections*, di Prima cited his extravagant spending as the source of their financial troubles and described selling personal papers and prized books from her collection for quick cash (408, 348). Compounding these issues was di Prima's sizeable household, which comprised her husband and children as well as an "extended family" (*Recollections* 273). In a February 19, 1968, letter to Ferlinghetti, Marlowe stressed the profitability of the limited editions the press was producing, noting, "In New York this counts. We are now supporting six adults and five children" (City Lights Records, Box 8, Folder 20). Bookshop owner and friend Bob Wilson complicated Duncan's view of di Prima as a "Lady Pirate," recalling in his memoir that she was the primary provider for her family as well as a fluctuating number of musicians, artists, and writers who lived with them: "virtually none of them had jobs or could in any way contribute money to the communal establishment, but somehow Diane always managed to supply food and shelter for anyone who came knocking at her door" (101).

During the period that di Prima ran Poets Press, she and her family moved multiple times, which also affected her finances and ability to publish. According to Brenda Knight:

The last half of the sixties saw Diane very much on the move—living at an upstate New York ashram; staying at Timothy Leary's experimental, psychedelic community at Millbrook; and traveling on an epic 20,000-mile journey, kids in tow, across America in a Volkswagen bus, reading poetry at dance halls, bars, storefronts, colleges, and galleries. She finally settled in San Francisco. (126)

A photograph album Marlowe kept from 1965-1967 documents their extensive cross-country road trip—including stays in Massachusetts, Michigan, Colorado, British Columbia, California, and New Mexico, among other locales—and makes apparent why in a November 1967 Poets Press notice di Prima stated, "Poets Press is back in business after a year's lull" (Diane di Prima Papers, 1955-2008, PA-12002/1; di Prima and Baraka 477). (The press produced only three titles in 1967: David Henderson's *Felix in the Silent Forest*, Jay Wright's *Death as History*, and the limited edition *10 Times a Poem* by Gregory Corso.) Furthermore, the publisher location of Poets Press volumes (when this information is included) shows evidence of di Prima's multiple moves. During its existence, Poets Press was located in New York City (at multiple addresses); Kerhonkson, New York; Millbrook, New York; and San Francisco.<sup>12</sup>

In a letter to a friend dated September 7, 1969, di Prima announced that she was “getting rid of Poets Press, forever this time, I think” (Diane di Prima Papers, 1948-1971, Box 1). The following week, di Prima wrote to Marlowe about divesting her remaining stock, expressing relief about ending a project that had become a burden:

I brought all the remaining Poets Press books to Julia Newman, who will sell them on consignment—very slowly, no doubt, that’s the way of it here, but small monies will come in handy in the months ahead. It was like I had lost hundreds of pounds—I was walking off the ground after I got rid of the books. (Diane di Prima Papers, 1955-2008, Folder 328, 13 September 1969)

By the end of the 1960s, di Prima had several reasons for wanting to shut down the press. In 1969 di Prima and Marlowe divorced. Their relationship had been turbulent from the outset, and Marlowe’s homosexuality, the couple’s unstable finances, and frequent arguments contributed to their breakup. Di Prima also had decided to relocate to Northern California, where printing equipment and supplies were harder to come by and more expensive than in New York (Gibson 90). Perhaps most importantly, she saw her move to the West Coast as a way to start a new chapter of her life and to explore different opportunities and interests (*The Poetry Deal* 2).

Given di Prima’s contributions, it may be surprising that she and Poets Press have not garnered greater recognition. Part of the reason rests with her position as a woman writer associated with the Beat Generation. Amy Friedman has observed that “for decades women writers associated with the Beat Generation have been an ignored presence, only glancingly acknowledged as the critical fascination with the Beats continues to grow” (230). In “Mapping Women Writers of the Beat Generation,” Ronna C. Johnson demonstrates that the neglect of their male contemporaries within the scene, as well as that of critics, academics, and media outlets of the era, had a lasting impact on scholarship about and the legacy of the women writers: “to study women Beat writers has meant to track dispersed, uncollected, and sometimes unpublished sources, a body of work that in this disarray does not readily present itself as a coherent field of writing” (4). Di Prima herself has cited gender as a reason, and also the particular kind of woman she was: neither sad nor quiet, and decidedly unapologetic for her transgressions (Waldman 29). Additionally, aspects of di Prima’s press have contributed to its neglect. One factor is the objects it produced. Russo has contended that small-run chapbooks such as the ones Poets Press published have been “mere ephemera in the eyes of the custodians of literary history, easily effaced”

(246). Furthermore, archival absences and misinformation have posed challenges for recovering the press's history.

Although Poets Press was short-lived and plagued with financial troubles, its output and di Prima's accomplishments are significant, and its history helps reveal a more complete picture of small press publishing of the period. An examination of the press's catalog reveals remarkable variety, a vital cross section of underground literary movements and counterculture concerns, and multiple first collections by important poets. Some of Poets Press's publications remain in print today, a testament to the longevity of the writing and di Prima's selections. For example, Clive Matson's *Mainline to the Heart* and Timothy Leary's *Psychedelic Prayers* are still available in their entirety, and poems that appeared in Poets Press editions are now available in the collected or selected poems of Audre Lorde, Allen Ginsberg, and di Prima, just to name a few. Poets Press provides a window into the life of Diane di Prima, a major underground poet during a period of experimentation and advocacy, when she created an influential outlet for her writing and that of other emerging poets.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Di Prima and Marlowe were married from 1962-1969 (di Prima, *Pieces of a Song* 198-99).

<sup>2</sup> Russo has noted that di Prima, Margaret Randall, Rosemarie Waldrop, Anne Waldman, and Bernadette Mayer all edited with a husband or lover (246).

<sup>3</sup> The major repositories of di Prima's papers include Syracuse University, the University of North Carolina, the University of Connecticut, and the University of Louisville.

<sup>4</sup> Randall's review appeared in *Negro Digest*, a publication that regularly reviewed Poets Press releases by African American poets.

<sup>5</sup> "Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge" (SEEK) Program: A pre-baccalaureate program established in 1965 and still in existence today.

<sup>6</sup> Jed Birmingham observed, "In 1963, Auerhahn printed di Prima's *The New Handbook of Heaven*. Haselwood got burned on the printing costs, and then further burned when di Prima bootlegged the book on her own Poets Press imprint" ("Auerhan Press Archive").

<sup>7</sup> Two exceptions are *Huncke's Journal* and *War Poems*, both of which included a table of contents and page numbers.

<sup>8</sup> Ginsberg's introduction appeared in the second edition.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Corso's *10 Times a Poem* was published in 1967, and Robert Creeley's *Mazatlan: Sea* was published in 1969.

<sup>10</sup> Lew Welch's 1969 review of *On Bear's Head* makes clear both the advantage and drawback of Whalen's decision to publish with Harcourt, Brace and World rather than Poets Press. Welch said, "Until now, the poetry of Philip Whalen could be found only in Little Magazines or in editions so small they quickly sold out. *On Bear's Head* is a one-volume collection of nearly all his work, more than 20 years of it. One of this century's most brilliant poets is at last accessible to all." However, he also lamented the cost of the volume, which, at \$17.50, was "outrageous."

<sup>11</sup> A reference to two of the holograph volumes from Poets Press in 1968: Allen Ginsberg's *Scrap Leaves: Tasty scribbles* and Robert Creeley's *5 Numbers*.

<sup>12</sup> Di Prima's essay "The Holidays at Millbrook–1966" in Ann Charters's *Portable Sixties Reader* discusses the experience of living at Leary's estate.

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